

Robert White

W14983 1 Conn. 1938-9 ROBERT WHITE

The White brothers, Matthew and Robert, live in houses almost identical next door to each other on North Main Street, are within a few years of each other in the matter of age, have been employed in the Plume and Atwood mill for nearly half a century. Born in Ireland, they were brought to this country by their parents as youngsters, educated in Thomaston, went to work in their early teens.

Robert deprecates his knowledge of mill lore, declares his brother Matt, who has a seniority of several years in employment as well as age, is much better qualified as an informant.

"Matt's the man you want to see. Why, he's been there now for let's see, must be fifty years. Never been off the job he started on. He can tell you anything you want to know about the mill. I can't remember when the hell I started in to tell you the truth. But I think was seventeen years old at the time, and I'm sixty two now. Figure it out yourself, what does that come to, if you're quick at figures. Matt, he was only fourteen, when he went in.

"Old Man Grilley was superintendent then. Fred Henderson's father was master mechanic. Mr. Kenea was in charge of the casting shop. In the office they had Eastwood and Stoughton and Jennie Lutz, and that was all. Ralph French, the president, and his brother Will, were workin' in the castin' shop. D. S. Plume was president—that's this lad's grandad that's vice president now—Kellogg Plume. Byers, the superintendent, was workin' out in the yard. But he didn't stay there long, Billy didn't. He had a great head for figures. He got in with Chatfield, and Chatfield liked him, and he went right on up. Chatfield was boss joiner, but he had quite a lot to say. He got out patents, and designed machinery, some of it is in use yet.

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"There's only a few left of the ones that started in about the time I did.

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I don't think there's more than a half dozen that've been there longer than me. Billy Lundrigan's one. He's been there longer. You wouldn't think it too look at him, but he's close to eighty years old. He's gettin' so it tells on him, too. He come up to help me with a pan of work the other day. We put it on a jitney. But if I hadn't of taken hold of him and pulled him to one side, that jitney would've run over his foot. He didn't like it very well, but he realized, I guess, that I was just tryin' to help him.

"Lundrigan had been there for some time when I went in. I left for a while and went to work in the clock shop and came back. Thirteen and a half cents an hour they paid, in the mill, sixty hours a week. Not very much, hey? Where the casting shop is now was an apple orchard. They didn't have the buildings then they've got today, of course.

"They started me in the old overhauling room. They had thirty men workin' there then, overhaulin' by hand. Now they only got a few, and with the planers and all they get out three times the work in thirty five hours we used to do in sixty.

"Yessir. And up at the upper end of the mill they were pulling out the muffles by hand. They used to work with wheelbarrows. Did everything by hand. They tell you they didn't have any more help then than they have now. Don't you believe it."

"Take the metal. It used to take four rollings and four annealings to get it down from fifty seven thousands to ought ought eight. Now they do it, in one.

"Yessir. And there weren't any foreigners workin' there then. No Polish on the Ward at all. All them houses on Railroad street were owned by Plume and Atwood and the Yellow Row on Chapel street was owned by the clock shop, and the families that lived in them were mostly Irish, with a few Yankee. English Irish 3 and Yankees were all you'd see in the mill.

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"First Polack I remember to come in their was old August, I forget what the hell his last name was. He lived on a farm up off the Torrington road and worked in the mill. Then there was John Bristol his name was Mazonsky, but he worked for Bristol up in the Brick yard, and after a while they got calling him Bristol. He was one of the oldest of the Polack workers.

"A lot of them had their names changed like that. Or they'd be too damn hard to pronounce, and they'd give 'em some other name. Like Smith, Old Man Smith works over there yet. He's one of the oldest of the Polish workers too.

"Yessir. Castin'? No I never did that. It's a hell of a job. The fires burn a man out. Lots of them get burnt out. That heat is no good for a man. You know Charley Buckland? He's burnt out. That man used to be as fleshy as I am, but look at him now. Skinny as a rail. He couldn't retire though. He got out of the castin' shop more than ten years ago, and I don't think he ever intended to work again in his life, but he couldn't stand idleness. He asked the Old Man to take him back. So the Old Man gave him a soft job in the packin' room. Retirement kills a man. They've pensioned 'em off, over there, but they never live long afterwards.

"Old Abel Beardslee went like that. He was gettin' old, got so he was fallin' asleep at the work. You can't do that workin' on the rolls. The Old Man saw him noddin' a coupla times, and he finally persuaded him he ought to retire on a pension. Old Abel died before he was out a year. He'd of been alive yet, if they'd let him work. But of course if a man can't keep up with the work, and he might get hurt or something, he can't expect to stay there.

"They're pretty good about it, the company is, they let a man stay on as long as possible. But they're far behind some of the others on their pensions in this country. Now I went back to Ireland on a trip with my old man in 1924. And 4 over there, they got it fixed so that a man gets half of what he earns at the time he retires. If a man gets thirty dollars a week, his pension is fifteen. They should adjust it like that here.

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"Yessir. The old man didn't stay in Ireland but three weeks. He wanted to come back, after that, and back we come. Nothin' was like he thought it was goin' to be. All his old friends were dead, the town where he lived was changed, old buildin's were torn down, new ones were put up. He'd kept the picture in his mind's eye of the place just the way he'd left it, and all the years in this country, he kept thinkin' of it, and thinkin' of it, and lookin' forward to the day when he could go back for a visit. He never realized—or probably he never wanted to realize, there'd be changes. Yessir. He was a mighty disappointed man.

"Take this town here. It ain't grown a lot but the changes in fifty years, boy. You'd be surprised if you see a picture of the way it used to be. It could've been some town, this town here, if it wasn't for some of the landowners like the Thomases and the Bradstreets. You know Plume and Atwood would've built their Waterbury factory here instead of down to the city, if they could've bought that meadow land. But the Thomases wouldn't sell.

"Yessir. And now I hear they're goin' to tear down the old Brick school. That's another landmark, I went to school over there, I saw Paddy Dwyer just the other day and we got to talkin' about it. You know Paddy, do you? I went to school with him, and I used to work in the mill with him years ago. But Paddy couldn't stay in one place. Drink got the best of Paddy, though it hasn't seemed to do him much harm, by God. He can walk fifteen or twenty miles a day with the best of them.

"I was standin' out by the gate one day and Paddy came along and he came over to speak to me. We talked for a while and he went on. Al. Bradley—he's got a preety good job in the wire mill—he says to me 'I was up to Boston the other 5 day, and I seen that fella walkin' along the highway. I know it was the same man. Who is he?'

"I says 'that's the fella that might be standin' there where you are, if it hadn't been that he liked his drink a little too much.' Yessir. That's the truth, Paddy worked in the wire mill, and they liked him there too. He was a hardworkin' lad, and honest, but he took to drinkin'. Paddy used to say the first fella that ever drew wire in this country was smuggled over in a

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barrel. Said old Timm Corrigan told him. On account of the law they had against bringin' in foreign labor.

“Yessir. My brother Matt can tell you about the mill. He's been there about as long as any of them. But you'll have to wait a while, if you want to see Matt. He's got the grippe.”